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ABSTRACT

Recent literature demonstrates the need for closer examination of general track curriculum students' experiences in order to increase high school graduation rates. General track students' reactions to school policies and practices governing extracurricular activities and attendance are described in this report. A case study methodology involved indepth interviews with 236 individuals, 178 of whom were high school students who are the focus of this report. Students reported that some school improvement policies are counterproductive and inequitable and described their classes as boring and their participation in school activities as obstructed. Findings demonstrate the need for institutionalized procedures to obtain student input about school improvement policies and for increased student participation opportunities. (26 references) (LMI)

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THE NEGLECTED DROPOUT: GENERAL TRACK STUDENTS

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the
American Educational Research Association
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THE NEGLECTED DROPOUT: GENERAL TRACK STUDENTS

Five years ago, in response to high dropout rates, Florida restructured its efforts to meet the needs of at-risk students. However, the comprehensive programs supported by the 1986 Dropout Prevention Act meet the needs of only a small percentage of Florida's student population, those most at-risk of dropping out. Consequently, Florida's graduation rate has remained unacceptably low because students other than those defined as "at-risk" also drop out. Thus if Florida schools are to increase their graduation rates, they need to move beyond reliance on special programs for those at the bottom and determine why average achieving students drop out of school. Responding to this need, the Office of Policy Research & Improvement in the Florida Department of Education commissioned a study to determine whether any school policies or practices might be unwittingly pushing students out of school (Damico, Roth, Fradd, & Hankins, 1990, 1991). This paper focuses on a portion of that study, general track students' reactions to policies and practices governing extracurricular activities and attendance. The first set of policies seeks to provide students with opportunities to bond with school through participation in the extracurricular activities of the informal curriculum, while the second is concerned with insuring that students are in classrooms to receive the formal curriculum. Paradoxically, these policies frequently have the obverse effect and result in student disengagement with the life of school.. How and why does this occur?

School improvement efforts directed toward increasing the graduation rate of general track students have been hampered by lack of research on those dimensions of education which are most likely to push these students out of school. Studies of differing curricular tracks have tended to emphasize the basis on which students are assigned to them (cf. Jones, 1987; Oakes, 1985; Rosenbaum, 1976) or contrast academic experiences of those in college preparatory courses to those in vocational or remedial courses (cf. Adelman, 1983; Davis & Haller, 1981; Natriello, Alexander, & Pallas, 1989; Vanfossen, Jones & Spade, 1987). The educational experiences of those in the middle have been left largely unexplored. And yet, in the decade between the late 1960's and the late 1970's, the percentage of students in the general curriculum increased from 12% to 42.5% (Adelman, 1983). And there is no indication that these percentages are declining.

While scant, there is evidence in the research literature supporting the proposition that educators need to examine more closely the experiences of those in the general curriculum in order to increase high school graduation rates. As the size of the student population assigned to the general track has grown, it has begun to set the "tone" of a school's social-learning climate (Adelman, 1983), and students enrolled in it are more alienated from school and have less focused aspirations than those in either the academic or vocational tracks (Echternacht, 1976). A national study using follow-up data from the High School and Beyond Study

(Vanfossen, Jones, & Spade, 1987) found general and vocational track students, as compared to those in the academic curriculum, were less committed to academic goals, had poorer classroom discipline, and received more negative treatment by teachers. These authors concluded, "...students in nonacademic tracks are not [emphasis in original] given an environment that encourages them to increase their performance and their educational and occupational aspirations" (p. 116). But what type of environment are they given?

In an effort to understand the ways in which a school's policies and practices may to contribute students' physical or psychological withdrawal from school, the concept of engagement was employed in this study. Engagement may be thought of as a continuum with integration into the life of the school on one end and alienation or disengagement on the other. (cf. Farrell, 1988; Fine, 1986; Miller, Leinhardt, & Zigmond, 1988; Newmann, 1989; Wehlage, 1989). Academic engagement describes the ways in which students respond to their schools' formal curriculum, including its content, academic demands, and learning tasks (Miller et al., 1988; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). Social engagement, on the other hand, encompasses interpersonal relationships and participation in the life of the school, including its co-curricular and extracurricular programs (Miller, Leinhardt, & Zigmond, 1988).

Students who are academically and/or socially engaged with their schools' programs are likely to persist to graduation, while those who are estranged from them are most likely to drop out. This leaves a large body of students in the middle--those for whom we have difficulty predicting the likelihood of their graduation. They have some degree of engagement with the academic and/or social components of their schools. But their engagement is tenuous and academic difficulties or confrontations with the school's authority structure may convince them to leave before graduation.

We know that the decision to drop out is complex and the culmination of a gradual process of disengagement (Catterall, 1986). So if we are to increase graduation rates of general track students, we need first to understand the signals which trigger this process of disengagement. The study on which this paper is based sought to do this by providing these students with a voice through which they could reflect on various aspects of their schools which affected their academic and social engagement. This paper focuses on two aspects of the school environment - policies surrounding extracurricular activities and classroom attendance. Policies in these two areas have been promulgated to increase student engagement with the social and academic life of school.

METHODS

The data for this research were collected using case study methodology (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 1989). Most studies of high school graduation rates have been quantitative, relying on either questionnaires or secondary analysis of large data sets. These approaches assume that researchers know the appropriate questions to ask and the range of possible answers. Additionally, many of these researchers have not bothered to administer the instruments directly to students, but have assumed that educators could accurately report student experiences for them. When qualitative approaches have been used, they have tended to be confined to small populations of students who are either most likely to dropout or who are enrolled in alternative education programs (cf. Fine, 1985; Miller, et al., 1988; Wehlage, et al., 1989). In response to the limitations of previous research, data for this study were collected during in depth interviews with 236 individuals. Consequently, this study presents an insider's view of school policies and practices; it tapped the perceptions of students, teachers, and administrators as they reflected on their experiences in schools.

In order for this study to be representative of districts within Florida [each district in the state is an entire county], a variety of sampling procedures were used. To insure variability in the sample, school districts were ranked from high to low by graduation rate. One district was selected from those with graduation rates above the state mean, one at the state mean, and one below it. In addition to graduation rate, sociodemographic information, such as geographic region, variations in racial/ethnic composition of the student population, and urban-rural setting, was considered in final sample selection. District cooperation was secured by the State Commissioner of Education.

In each of the three districts directors of student services, curriculum, and evaluation/testing were interviewed. Two high schools within each district were then selected for in depth study. These schools were selected to reflect variations within the county. In each of these six high schools a sampling of administrators, counselors, teachers and 10th and 12th grade students were interviewed. This paper reports data from interviews with adolescents.

In depth interviews were completed with 178 adolescents in the six high schools. Interviews ranged from 90 minutes to slightly over two hours. Individual interviews were conducted with 101 general track students, while 77 Honors and Advanced Placement students were interviewed in groups of four to six. The group interviews were designed to examine the extent to which perceptions of school varied across achievement levels. One of the researchers was bilingual and thus able to interview students in Spanish or English, depending on their preference. All interviews were

conducted during school hours in quiet, private rooms. Interviews were typed directly into laptop computers rather than being tape recorded.

Interview protocols were developed based upon a review of the at-risk and dropout literature. The purpose of the student interviews was to tap perceptions of school in terms of both academic and social engagement. The interview protocols were open-ended enough to elicit individual experiences and beliefs of those being interviewed while containing enough structure to permit comparisons across respondents.

Descriptive summaries, written after each school visit, were used to develop a series of coding categories to be used in the analysis of the interview data. Each of four researchers coded one-fourth of the interviews, with 10 percent of them being multiply coded to insure reliability. The Ethnograph program (Seidel, 1988) was used to facilitate data analysis. This program assists qualitative researchers in many of the mechanical aspects associated with text data analysis.

Findings from the analysis of student interview data were clustered under the following categories: Curriculum, both formal and informal; academic and social support systems; school rules and their enforcement; and social learning climate (Damico, Roth, Fradd, & Hankins, 1990, 1991). This paper focuses on general track students' responses to policies and practices in the areas of the informal curriculum and the enforcement the schools' attendance policies.

The Informal Curriculum

The informal curriculum refers to those occasions at school outside of regular classes which provided opportunities for students to learn skills necessary to function effectively as responsible adult members of society.

> *You learn things not just in class but in the halls: How mean some people are, how ignorant some people are; how some people take advantage, how some people are easily taken advantage of.*

Skills such as leadership, cooperation, and planning were not necessary for success in academics. The non-academic dimension of schooling supplied the occasions for exercising valuable inter- and intra-personal skills.

Two areas within the non-academic dimension were examined to assess the extent to which these skills were acquired and mastered by general track students: (1) co-curricular activities, (2) extracurricular activities. Each of these areas required that students make a contribution to a group enterprise. Learning how

to engage in socially valuable interpersonal transactions was conspicuously absent from the decontextualized intellectual demands students routinely faced. Success in school was determined for the most part on students' individual and isolated effort. Rare was the classroom teacher or school district that had devised a grading system which included performance on cooperative learning or group problem-solving tasks. Therefore, those occasions where students learned to work toward a common goal deserved close scrutiny.

Co-curricular Activities

The co-curricular activity that most closely approximated the behavior of adult citizens was student government, specifically, the process of choosing class leaders and student council representatives. Could it be that the phenomenon of voter apathy which has reached alarming proportions in local and national elections has its roots in the campaigns for high school class officers? How skeptical were average students about the people who ran for office? The answer was very. They reported that the same few people, usually the "Preps," (college bound students whose parents know the value of a service-laden resume) appeared on the ballots every year.

> *Student government is for the really smart kids, the more popular ones. If you're smart, you're popular here. The same people run the student government from the 9th grade on. They always win.*
>
> *Lower social class can't find anyone they can trust, so they don't vote. My friends never get a chance.*

Once elected, these officers did not stand up on behalf of the student body to protest unpopular decisions made by school or district administrators; instead they busied themselves with innocuous matters such as choosing the color scheme for the prom or the amusement park for senior class night.

> *Student Council doesn't have any voice. I think they should be able to vote on what kind of clothes we wear and whether we can go off campus. All they do is decide when we aregoing to have prom or dances. They hardly bring up any issues about what they want to change.*
>
> *I really don't know why they have it. They do the ring ceremony and the president makes a speech. They have no power at all. They say they can change things but they have done nothing.*

> *...really don't know when they have their meetings. They have to elect officers and get candidates. I haven't heard much about it. They are supposed to listen to complaints but what good comes of it, I don't know. They have an answer for everything. They do dances for juniors and seniors. Important things they don't do.*

Because they perceived student government to be an organization without any power or consequence, most general curriculum students regarded running for office as a school-sanctioned popularity contest for overachievers.

> *The popular group go for attention. Same people get in every year. It makes me sick. They aren't even nice.*

Another intriguing similarity between school and bipartisan politics was the fact that running for a school office incurred considerable expense. Only a few of the students interviewed knew someone who had run for office (none of the general curriculum students interviewed was a class officer); several commented on the cost of mounting a campaign. They realized that students whose parents could defray the cost of papering every available inch of wall space with hundred of posters and distributing pins and balloons to supporters had a better chance of winning an election that someone who did not have a large war chest to capture the crowd's eye.

This inequality in resources was recognized by one school in the high graduation rate district. Its response was to simplify the procedure for getting on the ballot (just tell the homeroom teacher, no need for signed petitions) and, for candidates in the final election, to subsidize the costs of campaigning. This intervention on the part of the school produced greater involvement in the electoral process by a wider spectrum of the student body, but it did not end the monopoly on government offices by college bound students.

The school newspaper and yearbook were likewise staffed almost exclusively by college bound seniors. Because these publications were routinely entered into state and national competitions by their faculty advisors, there was a press to recruit and retain only top-notch writers and artists. The degree of professionalization now required for these media productions meant that ordinary students, who might not be familiar with the latest computer graphics or desktop publishing packages, were not likely to be invited to fill these high-visibility positions.

The low levels of involvement of general curriculum students in co-curricular activities indicated that, with the exception of one school in the high graduation district, administrators and teachers were overlooking the power of service to strengthen large numbers of students' sense of affiliation to school.

Extracurricular Activities

Student participation in extracurricular activities depended on a number of factors: the methods the school used to publicize the availability of clubs and teams; the recruiting zeal of the faculty advisor or coach; the tradition of peer group involvement in certain interest areas. Methods for publicizing available options ranged from a list students said they knew existed somewhere in the guidance office to special rush programs featuring booths set up during an extended lunch hour. Schools that did not stage an official club-shopping expo relied instead on the informal system of faculty sponsor recruitment or peer invitation. For students unaffiliated with veteran club participants, or who by chance were not in the class of a faculty sponsor, the chances of being invited to join a club were slim.

There is ample evidence that students bond to their high school through their participation in extracurricular activities (Ekstrom et al, 1986). Service clubs and athletic teams, in particular, have long been known to serve as vehicles for students eager to excel in non-academic activities which are valued by the community at large. With this association in mind, one might assume that schools would try everything possible to facilitate participation of low achieving students. However, this emphatically was not the case. In the low graduation district, students reported that overcrowding had forced school officials to eliminate club meetings from the lunch schedule. Postponing club meetings to after school meant that those students who had no transportation home save the school bus could not exercise the option to stay late and try out for teams or attend club meetings. *"My cousin wanted to try out for the tennis team but his mother doesn't have a car so he couldn't."* The high graduation district did recognize the importance of scheduling extracurricular activities during school hours. Twice a month the last period of the day was set aside for club meetings.

Other obstacles faced students who might have otherwise found in school-sponsored peer collaboration the motivation to persist to graduation. One was the minimum GPA requirement. For varsity athletics, a 1.5 GPA was required for team eligibility; service clubs set their admission criterion at 2.0. Thus, historically underachieving students were effectively excluded from the very kinds of activities which engender a sense of affiliation. Instead these students were given the message that their academic troubles prohibited them from participating in the civic life of the school and the larger community.

Another obstacle preventing many ordinary students from entering the social life of school was the cost of participating. Membership in highly visible, highly competitive, all school group activities such as athletics, band, and cheerleading required expenditures (which could run to several hundred dollars a year)

for uniforms and training camps. Such costs effectively discouraged students whose parent(s) lacked discretionary income. Once again, that same school in the high graduation district which had acted to level the playing field for student elections made a commitment to its economically disadvantaged students and subsidized the purchase of their instruments and uniforms. Funds for these subsidies came from companies and organizations in the community who understood (as a result of the principal's lobbying) that these showcase teams were the basis for generating school and community pride. Because these teams were able to recruit from the whole spectrum of the student body, they enjoyed the enthusiastic support of every segment of the populace. There was a powerful incentive to stay in a school whose teams' triumphs and setbacks were followed avidly by nearly everyone in the community.

ATTENDANCE POLICIES

Of all the policies within a school's student handbook, probably none occupy as much time or attention as those surrounding various aspects of attendance--behaviors ranging from being tardy, cutting a class, leaving school grounds, and being truant. Given this attention, it was surprising to discover how little research had been completed on attendance policies. Studies on this topic have focused almost exclusively on the correlation between frequency of truant behavior and dropping out of school (cf. Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollock, & Rock, 1986; Hess, Wells, Prindle, Liffman, & Kaplan, 1987; Rumburger, 1987; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). No studies of the attendance behavior of general track or college bound students could be located. Yet since these policies impact directly on every student in a school they have the potential to directly affect all students' engagement with learning.

Though the research out of which this paper emerged (Damico, Roth, Fradd, & Hankins, 1990) obtained descriptions of student discipline codes and their enforcement from principals, counselors, and teachers, attention here is focused on these issues from the student perspective. Three attendance related issues emerged from the analysis of the student interview data. First, students had **never been asked why** they might be tardy or cut class; yet students felt they frequently had legitimate reasons. Secondly, the determination of whether an absence was excused or unexcused was seen by many students as discriminatory. And finally, students in the low and medium graduation district provided evidence that their schools' policies were differentially enforced, with high achieving students receiving lighter punishments than those in the general track. Consequently, reliance on descriptions of a school's attendance policies and the punishments for their infractions fails to convey the ways in these policies inadvertently "push" some students out of school. Each of these three attendance issues will be considered in turn.

Tardies and Cutting Class

Student explanations of tardiness to classes centered on the physical difficulty of getting from one class to another in the allotted time, a felt need to socialize with friends, and perceptions of teacher indifference.

> *For me to get from the portables, upstairs to my locker and then to class can make me late. Inside the school you can do it, but then you don't have time to talk to friends. Five minutes just doesn't seem like enough time.*

> *I have one class out at the end of the portables and then the next at the front of the school and I can just barely make it, but if I have to go to my locker or there is a fight in the hall, I can't make it on time.*

It was not surprising that students felt they were being unfairly penalized when distance between classes resulted in referrals for being tardy. Even when schools managed to accommodate all their students in a single building, the crush of a large number of students trying to move through hallways frequently made passage during the time between bells impossible.

Students expressed a real need to socialize with peers during the school day, and yet most found little time in their schedules to do so. Without meaning to be late for a class, students reported they would begin talking to a friend in the hallway and then suddenly find they were going to be tardy. This press for social engagement was not surprising given the strong evidence that adolescents view school as a site for emotional as well as intellectual stimulation (Fine, 1986). Social engagement also was one of the reasons adolescents gave for cutting classes. As schools have become overcrowded and lunch periods split, students often may not see friends any time during the school day. Thus, classes scheduled during lunch shifts were among those students frequently cut. Students at one school claimed there were those who stayed in the cafeteria for all three lunch shifts rather than going to any 5th period classes.

Students also cut, or were late to, classes in which they felt their attendance didn't make a difference--either the teacher didn't care or so little instruction was going on that they weren't missing anything by being late. Other research (Pokay, Jernigan, & Michael, 1990) also has found that students are selective in the classes to which they are late or cut. These choices have to do with their relationships with teachers, evaluations of the quality of instruction, and the importance of being in class to learn new material.

> *On the first day of school a good teacher will pass out rules and what you need to be prepared for this class. Others say 'well, I didn't really want to come back today and I'm sure you guys didn't either.'*

Excused and Unexcused Absences

Unexcused absences are those for which there is no officially sanctioned justification. Students may accrue unexcused absences through a history of repeated class tardies or by being counted absent from a class without pre-arranged permission. Efforts to increase class attendance and reduce the number of unexcused student absences had taken two approaches in the schools studied. The high graduation district had instituted a series of positive incentives to encourage students to be in class on time. For instance, they had inaugurated a policy excusing from mid-semester exams those students with a "C" or higher grade average and fewer than a specified number of absences--the number of absences varying by the student's course grade. Since academically less secure students are especially frightened of tests covering large amounts of material, this policy had the double effect of convincing them to come to class and keep their grades up.

The other two districts used a punitive approach to decreasing tardies and unexcused absences. Under these arrangements, students' grades were reduced either an entire letter grade or a specified percentage for unexcused absences; again, a certain number of tardies translated into an unexcused absence. Unfortunately, these policies were not working to get student to class on time, but rather were forcing some of them to drop out. A senior discussed this process:

> *Taking 2.2% off somebody's grade doesn't help a child want to come to school. If you work hard and you have lots of points off, then you don't want to come to class because you are failing or getting really low grades even though you are working hard.*

In a similar vein, an honors student in another school commented on this process in the following way.

> *The attendance policy encourages kids to drop out. They want to lower the truancy rate but then tell you if you miss a day your grade will go down. Sometimes teachers don't report attendance accurately and you can have your grade lowered even if you were in class.*

At this school the policy of reducing students' grades by a letter for every unexcused absence had a major impact on high achieving students as well as those in the general track. This problem arose because teachers at this school were not always sure what constituted an unexcused absence, students weren't marked in attendance

when they were, or the office hadn't notified teachers that students were excused. To protect students there was an appeal process; one school had 400 appeals of first semester grades. Many general track students, however, didn't feel they would be able to make a case that would be accepted.

School policies defining the difference between excused and unexcused absences clearly discriminated against some groups of students. The most blatant of these was the district where an absence, even of one day, had to be supported by a written note from a doctor in order to be considered "excused." This policy sent the message to all parents that their word was suspect. The general track students were particularly hard hit by this policy because many of their parents could not afford to take them to a doctor even when they had missed several days with the flu. What should have been an excused absence was translated by the district as unexcused.

Even when schools accepted written excuses from parents, some students still encountered problems. Most schools had a deadline within which written notice had to be received from the parent or guardian for an absence to be excused. Unfortunately, many students came from homes where parents could not be relied upon either to write a note or to write it in a timely manner. Where these polices were adhered to strictly--a note received after the deadline was not accepted--students who could least afford the penalties associated with an unexcused absence regularly accrued them. One tenth grader reported that he was going to leave the state and live with his father for the remainder of the academic year since his school's calculations of unexcused absences would result in his failing many of his courses.

Equity and the Enforcement of School Rules

Wehlage and Rutter (1986), using the High School and Beyond data, found that high school graduates did not differ from dropouts in their perceptions of teachers as uncaring or in their evaluation of the disciplinary system as unfair and ineffectual. This study found also that honors, advanced placement, and general track students all held very similar views on the ways in which their schools arbitrarily enforced their student conduct code. In fact, a consistent theme running throughout all our data was that "what happens to you in school depends on who you are." Life in our sample high schools was very different for general track and advanced placement students, especially in the medium and low graduation districts. In these schools students didn't complain about the rules per se, but rather about the unfairness with which they believed they were enforced. An Honors student in a low graduation district high school commented:

> *If you play in sports or some teachers like you, you won't get into any trouble at this school. Hugo and I were messing around in the atrium, and if we had been anyone else, they would have thought we were fighting. Even if we said we weren't. Any they would have been written up. But no one said anything to us.*

A general track student added additional confirmation to this perception.

> *I know someone who got into a fight and nothing happened to him, and another person was horsing around, not exactly fighting, and he got suspended.*

Students also reported that the monitoring of movement through the hallways during classes was unevenly enforced. For instance, student leaders and high achievers admitted they were less likely than others to be asked to present hall passes. These students indicated that they frequently cut classes they found boring--and that this was easy for them to do. No one questioned where they were going because of their reputations as high achievers and school leaders. The student government president, in one school, stated:

> *I'm in good with the administration. And I roam the halls and they [administrators] don't say anything to me.*

High achieving students frequently commented on how other students must feel when they were constantly challenged while moving through the hallways during classes.

One of the sharpest distinctions between the high graduation district and the other two was the extent to which students attending high graduation district schools knew their schools' rules, knew the consequences for infractions of these rules, and reported that the same consequences befell everyone who broke the rules. Moreover, they did not feel as though they were engaged in a battle with an administration convinced that they were always in the wrong. In contrast, students in the medium and low graduation districts reported that their schools' were suspicious of their motives and presumed them to be in the wrong.

> *If you get a referral they don't listen to your side of the story. Teachers have lied and I've seen this when I've been in a class and then in the office. They say 'I don't want to hear it' when a student tries to tell their side of the incident. Every person has their own version and they have a right to say what happened.*
>
> *'The teacher is always right.' Sometimes they make mistakes -- but not according to the school.*

The differential responses of the three school districts to student misconduct reflected, in a broader sense, their general orientation to their student population. The high graduation district took a more proactive or counseling approach and the others a punitive one. An honors student in the low graduation district stated:

> *There is no way here you can ever wipe the slate clean. No matter what you do, they always hold it over your head.*

In contrast a student at a high graduation district school talked about the assistant principal in the following terms.

> *People are more likely not to get into trouble. They know she's strict, but she's nice...She asks if we're making good grades and keeping them up. She doesn't favor people. Not like the assistant principal we had before.*

Students interviewed supported the need for rules governing school conduct. In fact, they reserved their harshest criticism for teachers and administrators who did not maintain control. However, this desire for orderliness was counterbalanced by a recognition that some rules were overtly punitive and others were applied differential to varying groups of students. In schools where this was the case, even the high achieving students played games with the rules to see how much they could get away with. The implemenation of attendance policies can affect directly students' engagement with learning.

DISCUSSION

This study pursued a line of questioning that ideally would be included in any assessment of the impact of new or revised educational policies. The researchers had been asked to investigate the intended and unintended effects on a target population--general track students--of new regulations designed to ensure that greater numbers of them would persist to graduation. After more than 500 hours of interviews, it became clear that schools did not have in place any mechanisms for assessing the full impact of these new regulations on students and teachers . Regularly listening to what students and faculty had to say about unforeseen problems or inequities created by new school rules was not an established procedure in any of the six high schools visited.

Yet if we are sincerely interested in school improvement in general and policies and practices that lead to better higher graduation rates in particular, then we need to listen to the voices of those most directly impacted by those policies and practices. What may sound like a reasonable requirement on paper (e.g. a minimum GPA in order to participate in extracurricular activities) in practice may act as a disincentive in the very

population we are seeking to encourage stronger bonding with school. Without institutionalizing some procedures for securing student and faculty feedback, we are not likely to notice, for example, when a policy is counterproductive or inequitable, as in the case of absence-forgiveness resting upon the ability to produce a doctor's note.

Another means of strengthening the commitment to student graduation is to expand the range of those able to participate in the social life of the school. This is not only an issue of equity (in that general track students are underrepresented in leadership positions), but also a means to increase the likelihood of engaging the interests and affiliation of students who seek compensation for disappointments or lack of distinction in academic affairs. There was no question in this study that the overwhelming majority of students were excruciatingly bored in their classes.

The quality of the experiences at school of general track students was generally ignored by school officials because such students presented few problems or demands. They did persist in coming to school even though they found their classes boring and their participation in school activities obstructed. These conditions demoralized them, but those who had been selected to be interviewed had made the decision, at least the day they talked to the researchers, to persevere. For those students who had not been selected because they were known to be disgruntled or who could not be found because they had already left the building, there remained the strong possibility that they soon would be gone for good, without anyone at school having become informed about why they chose to leave.

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